

“Our Poverty has No Shame; the Stomach has No Shame, so We Migrate Seasonally”: Women Sugarcane Cutters from Maharashtra, India

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Abstract

During the season of sugarcane cutting, men and women seasonally migrate toward the sugar belt. Drought conditions in their native districts are always highlighted as the reasons for seasonal migration. However, existing literature on sugarcane cutters emphasizes that mostly poor, lower caste, landless, small landholders, and resourceless people migrate to the sugar belt. Even pregnant or lactating mothers are not an exception for seasonal migration and the work of sugarcane cutting. In Maharashtra, issues like poor work conditions, labor rights, financial exploitation, hysterectomy among women, citizenship status, education, and health of sugarcane cutters are already in the discussion forums. After migration, these workers live without housing, sanitation facilities, and drinking water. For women, there is no social, economic, labor, and personal security. Workers have to bathe, defecate openly, and drink untreated water. Specifically, women have special health needs, and there should not be a compromise while accessing essential health services. Considering the background information, this article considers questions like why women migrate in adversity and do women work for the Sugar Belt without facing any hardship? People at large relate the phenomenon of migration to human development or economic development. Similarly, it is possible to study internal migration or seasonal migration. Nevertheless, the analysis argues that seasonal migration of the poor, unskilled, illiterate, lower caste, landless, resourceless, and vulnerable cannot be connected to human development. Instead, we can relate it to survival at large. Significantly, the ignorance of the state towards these workers and their needs can be seen from the perspective of social exclusion.

Keywords

Women sugarcane cutters, seasonal migration, migration of vulnerable people, sugar belt, reasons for migration, social exclusion

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Introduction

After Independence, agriculture policy favored the sugarcane crop, as also evidenced by a demand for sugar. Consequently, sugarcane crop production increased in Maharashtra. Therefore, the setup of sugar factories was indispensable for processing sugarcane into sugar. Meanwhile, the crop of sugarcane and its harvesting has a very long history. In India, the first sugar factory was established in 1784 in Bihar. After Independence, Indian agriculture policies supported sugarcane farmers. An increase in sugarcane crop cultivation is the result of those policies. In Maharashtra state, the first sugar factory was established in the district of Ahmednagar in 1948. It came into operation in 1950 and was India's first cooperative sugar factory. Later, numerous private and cooperative sugar factories were established. All development related to sugar production directly or indirectly encouraged the seasonal migration of people toward the sugar belt (Chithelen 1985; Engineer 1997). Due to the high output of sugarcane and the establishment of many sugar factories, the demand for labor increased. The seasonally migrated labor force from the drought-prone districts of Maharashtra fulfilled that demand (Chithelen 1985). Therefore, a favorable agriculture policy, increase in sugarcane cultivation, the establishment of sugar factories, and seasonal labor migration were demand-driven processes (Engineer 1997; Patil 2013). Even today, there is a supposition that drought conditions are the reason for the seasonal migration of sugarcane cutters. Even if we agree with that assumption, then logically, all people from drought-prone districts should migrate to the sugar belt to cope with the drought. Nevertheless, only poor, lower caste, and those without resources migrate toward the sugar belt. Notably, both men and women are equally involved in sugarcane cutting. Even pregnant or lactating women are not an exception for seasonal migration and involvement in sugarcane cutting.

Work conditions, work burden, and labor exploitation of sugarcane cutters are part of timely discussions in Maharashtra. After migration, these workers are without any security; there is no housing, sanitation facilities, or drinking water provision. For women, there is no social and personal security. Workers have to bathe, defecate openly, and drink untreated water (Abbas 2016; Bansode 2013; Engineer 1997; Kendre 2011; Shinde 2019). Despite such working conditions, people from drought-prone areas still prefer to work. This background gives us a context to explore the concerns of women sugarcane cutters. It also creates the space to underline the reasons behind seasonal migration and the involvement of women in sugarcane cutting. Incidentally, in countries that produce sugarcane, sugarcane harvesting is mainly performed by men (Santos et al., 2015; Pobreza & Azúcar 2007; Luz et al., 2012). Therefore, this article analyzes the reasons behind seasonal migration towards the sugar belt—the analysis of entry points for women to migrate highlights their negotiation at many levels. In addition, the nature of work and benefits of migration add relevance to the analysis of the reasons for the seasonal migration of women sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra.

Methodology

A qualitative study explored why women migrate toward the sugar belt—41 women were part of this study, 23 women were working for private sugar factories, and 18 for cooperative sugar factories. Nature of work, work conditions, and the reasons for migration were the framing factors. The data collected through this exploration was primarily analyzed using thematic analysis. The overall study mainly highlights the reasons behind the seasonal migration of women toward the sugar belt. The research proposal of the study had sought an ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board, TISS Mumbai. The ethical issues of the research were appropriately addressed by considering basic principles of human research, such as respect for participants, beneficence, and justice.

Results and Discussion

Socio-economic Profile of Women Sugarcane Cutters

Similar to the prior research on sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra, the present study features the dominant involvement of women from the lower castes. Study participants were from lower caste categories such as SC, ST, NT, and VJNT. Almost 70.7 per cent of the respondents were scheduled tribe, belonging to communities like Bhil, Pavra, and Varli. The remaining participants were from the different lower caste groups such as Matang, Vadar, Banjara, and Vanjari. Along with lower social status, participants were from poor economic strata. Most women were below the poverty line, as 27 women had yellow-colored ration cards. Nearly 13 women were without ration cards. All the respondents migrated from 8 different districts of Maharashtra, including districts like Dhule, Jalgaon, Nandurbar, Beed, Parbhani, Nashik, Aurangabad, and Jalna. Some of the districts are drought-prone, and some have recognition of tribal districts. The age structure of study participants was as follows: ten women were below 18 years, nearly 28 women were between 18–24 years, and three women were above 25 years. As informed by the participants, 38 out of 41 women were married before 18 years.

In terms of educational status, almost 82.9 per cent were illiterate. The remaining participants were educated up to secondary levels of education. The high proportion of illiteracy among these women is shocking. Similar trends continue even among the children of the sugarcane cutters. On enquiring about the none to low levels of education, many women responded by saying, “Why else would we be cutting the sugarcane then? Sugarcane cutting is like school for us”. The poor educational status of women explains the endorsement for the practice of early marriage among this demographic. It is important to note that many respondents who reported secondary education could not read and write except for their signature and name.

Nature of Work

In sugarcane cutting, there is no structure for the workers to work. Work starts anytime in the early morning and finishes at night. All workers are aware of the intensity of

toil during the working season. Otherwise, there is no fixed time or working hours. Workers have to work beyond their physical capacity. Almost everybody who works as a sugarcane cutter faces body pain on a daily basis. During the daytime, after the work responsibilities on the farm, women go to the tent area to cook and return to the field as soon as they finish cooking. From the tent area to the working field, they have to walk. That distance could be less than a kilometer or more. These workers avoid breaks between working hours since they aim to complete their target of cutting sugarcane. Based on the number of tons of sugarcane they receive their salary. In most cases, even pregnant / women with newborn babies endure the same work burden. Nobody is happy to work as a sugarcane cutter. However, there is continuity in their migration and sugarcane cutting, which is maintained out of helplessness, poverty, debt, and the absence of any other alternative. Many women experience weakness, body pain, giddiness, and other health problems. They have to compromise on their physical and mental health while working. Exploitation, exclusion, poverty, debt, illiteracy, and compromised motherhood are words to describe their overall status as human beings.

Is Seasonal Migration Beneficial or not?

Some of the participants said that seasonal migration benefits them to a level where they manage their survival. It was their only option to cope with drought and its consequences on their livelihoods at their native places. Besides being optimistic about migration, it is not about becoming rich or uplifting the economic status. It is about survival, sustainability, and thriving. Here, ‘thrive’ meant to build a house and ensure the marriage ceremony of sons and daughters but not become rich.

Moreover, according to a few of the respondents, there are no benefits through this work, but to survive and escape the drought. More importantly, many participants could not answer whether migration benefits them or not. It is because most of them migrated for the first time. The rest of them had long work experience in sugarcane cutting, where they said benefits vary from season to season; there is no permanent benefit in sugarcane cutting. Along with unfavorable work conditions and exploitation of these workers, these women live without social-economical security. They have to compromise their health, especially the reproductive health of women, and their children’s education. Still, questions remain, despite having adversity at the destination, why do they migrate? Why do only women from specific social groups migrate? Why are women left without an alternative for seasonal migration and sugarcane cutting?

Reasons for Migration

In the context of sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra, the people involved in the seasonal migration are often poor and landless. They migrate because of drought. This argument is valid in the larger sense, but we cannot apply it to all workers involved in sugarcane cutting. Instead, there is a need to include a few more workers’ perspectives on the reasons for migration. From the view of the present study, women migrate because of the consequences of drought conditions—a factor which has received less attention in previous research studies.

As women said, “There is no drinking water in my village, and I cannot afford to buy it”, or “I have land but do not have a water irrigation system.” Moreover, they also mentioned that there is no work availability, and therefore their needs for food are not met in their native place. Drought, water scarcity, debt, and work unavailability were the reasons to migrate toward the sugar belt. Alongside, building houses and any other fulfillment of their wish was also the reason behind the migration. In short, workers’ migration and involvement in sugarcane cutting is not largely associated with economic yield, but rather about receiving the bulk of the money at once and in advance. There are many constructed reasons behind the seasonal migration specific to Maharashtra. The migration of the sugarcane cutters is connected mainly with drought and its consequences, such as water scarcity and work unavailability, as also mentioned in the earlier analysis. However, certain sociological factors are attached to the reasons. Those reasons are reflected in the replies of women when they say, “Our poverty has no shame; our stomach has no shame, so we migrate.”

Entry Points for Women to Migrate

Marriage

As expressed by most women, marriage was the entry point where women enter the work of sugarcane cutting, this along with reasons like drought, water scarcity, and work unavailability. On the other hand, many get involved in seasonal migration and sugarcane cutting with their parents during their childhood, but without labor identity despite working along with their parents. However, marriage is the event where husband and wife together could be one pair (*koyata*), and they can deal with Mukadum or contractors separately. An essential part of marriage being an entry point is, in Indian culture or the culture of every caste or community, is that the marriage ceremony is a big event. It is significant even for poor people. This event requires money to perform different tasks, including giving dowry.

In the present study, most respondents were poor or with subsistence levels in the economy. As informed by women, it has become the tagline that, “If you want to perform the marriage ceremony, collect money in the bundle and perform it.” The critical question is, who would be ready to give a considerable amount of money to poor people? Which is a more convenient option for these poor people to choose? The answer is contractors or Mukadum. The contractors give an amount in advance even before working for them. Often, workers utilize that amount to perform the marriage ceremony of sons or daughters. Thereafter, returning that amount to contractors becomes the duty of a newly married couple.

Therefore, after marriage, couples become regular seasonal migrants. Hence, debt is also the reason for seasonal migration. However, soon after marriage, because of the high illiteracy rate and lack of awareness about family planning, these newly married women are likely to become pregnant very early. Still, because of the burden of money or debt, women have no choice but to migrate even during pregnancy. After marriage, their entry into the work of sugarcane cutting later becomes an affair each year. They

continue to borrow money from contractors every year to meet their basic needs and keep their survival intact. Therefore, in this seasonal cycle, women have to bear the burden of most of the loss. The loss is in physical distress because of the work burden. Women also carry the loss in terms of mental health especially during their pregnancy. Sometimes, because of seasonal migration and its continuous cycle, women do not get a chance to think about their reproductive health.

Poverty, Sense of Insecurity, and Family Disputes

Along with marriage as the entry point, extreme poverty, family disputes, and a sense of insecurity in the native place are equally responsible for the migration of women and their involvement in work. If a woman with parents, in-laws, or close relatives is involved in the seasonal migration for years, nobody will look after the woman. A similar context can be applied to the marriage of girls at a young age. If the woman chooses not to migrate, her parents or in-laws will not permit and let the woman stay alone in her native place. Therefore, that insecurity creates a bridge of no option, and a woman has to migrate. Moreover, it could also be said that the sense of insecurity comes from the extreme poverty level. Therefore, poverty and subsequent insecurity are the entry points that together make women migrate and get involved in sugarcane cutting.

In addition, based on the shared experiences of study participants, family disputes are also one of the crucial reasons for women to migrate. More specifically, if a woman has disputes with her in-laws or husband, she is left with only one option: seasonal migration and sugarcane cutting to secure her survival.

Visibility of the Seasonal Migration of Sugarcane Cutters from Possible Theoretical Frameworks

In particular, with the phenomenon of seasonal migration, some frameworks theoretically capture the phenomenon of migration. However, none of the frameworks comprehensively theorizes the seasonal migration of poor, lower caste and class, resourceless, and landless people. Many have framed such migration of people as a survival strategy—a perspective that is inadequate. For instance, Lee's pull and push factors theory of migration highlights the positive and negative factors involved as the reasons for migration (Lee 1966). There are a few more migration theories, like Ravenstein's laws of migration (Ravenstein 1885) and Wolpert's model of migration (Wolpert 1966). All these theories are inadequate to describe the seasonal migration of sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra.

However, the seasonal migration of women sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra calls for an alternative framework: drought conditions at the native place and availability of work in the sugar belt are not just the push and pull factors, respectively, but their migration is beyond these two. They migrate to adversity, they live contrary to their native environment, and their migration cannot be linked with any aspect of human development. The theory that plays a vital role in visualizing the framework of the present study is the theory of social exclusion. Social exclusion is “the denial of equal

access to opportunities imposed by particular social groups upon others.” The process of exclusion partially or wholly excludes certain groups or populations from full participation in the society they live in. The outcome of social inclusion may vary in terms of deprivation of income, education, health services, political and citizenship rights, state resources, and many others (Sen 2000; Thorat 2008; Judge 2014).

Seasonal Migration as Social Exclusion

Amartya Sen identifies two forms of social exclusion; active and passive social exclusion. In active social exclusion, there are deliberate attempts of the state/government or agency to exclude particular groups. There is no deliberate attempt to exclude passive social exclusion, but specific groups are excluded passively through the social processes (Sen 2000). On the other hand, Sukhdeo Thorat identifies social exclusion from the perspective of the caste system in India. He says, “Social exclusion in India revolves around the societal institutions that exclude, discriminate, and isolate people based on their caste, ethnicity, religion, and gender” (Thorat 2008; Judge 2014).

In the context of the present study, women’s seasonal migration toward the sugar belt realizes social exclusion. Though the state or district authorities are not involved in making them move toward the sugar belt, they migrate because of social dynamics, such as lower socio-economic status. However, why do only illiterate, lower castes, poor, landless, small landholders, and resourceless women migrate toward the belt? Suppose a particular geographical region, for instance, Marathwada in Maharashtra, faces drought conditions and its consequences—in that case, all the people from that region should migrate to avoid adversity. However, we find only certain groups of people migrate. Hence, these realities give space to argue that the seasonal migration of particular groups of women is a form of social exclusion.

Conclusion

Particularly with the phenomenon of migration, we see people largely connect it with human or economic development. Similarly, one can study internal migration or seasonal migration. However, we cannot connect the migration of poor, unskilled, illiterate, lower caste, landless, resourceless, vulnerable people to human development. Instead of economic growth or human development, we can connect their migration with survival.

The reasons for seasonal migration are social and political at large. Based on that, one can raise the development issue of women from the lower socio-economic strata. The seasonal migration of women from lower socio-economic status reveals the regional disparity and caste vulnerability. In general, resourceless people migrate seasonally because they cannot cope with adverse conditions. Along with drought conditions, the lack of work in their villages, lower social status, poverty, a sense of insecurity, marriage, debt, and family disputes are contributing factors to the seasonal migration of these women. The involvement of women, particularly in work with a

heavy burden, may cause loss. As a result, early marriage, early motherhood, high parity, compromised motherhood or reproductive health, etc., are common among this working group. Surprisingly, the state is aware of the seasonal migration of these workers, including pregnant or lactating women. However, nobody has taken responsibility for these workers in terms of providing state services such as education, health, and citizenship rights. Therefore, deliberate or non-deliberate negligence of the state creates the space to explore how women's seasonal migration leads to their social exclusion at many levels. Hence eliminating social disparities, regional imbalances, and vulnerable population pockets should be the core agenda of human development.

Declaration of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in the present research and writing.

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